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TAGS: [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [VT](#)  
SUBJECT: CARDINAL ZEN OPTIMISTIC ON HOLY SEE-CHINA RELATIONS

REF: (A) HONG KONG 2050 (B) BEIJING 9291 (C) VATICAN 074 (D) VATICAN 057

CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher Sandrolini, Deputy Chief of Mission,  
EXEC, State.  
REASON: 1.4 (d)

[¶1.](#) (C) Summary. Cardinal Zen of Hong Kong, visiting Rome, told DCM that both the Holy See and China want to put their talks back on track, and that Rome's negotiator will be heading soon to Beijing for this reason. He also commented on his relations with Beijing and the Patriotic Association, the slowly improving condition of Catholics in China, and the effects of China's recent illicit ordination of bishops. End summary.

[¶2.](#) (SBU) DCM met Cardinal Joseph Zen June 2 during Zen's brief stopover in Rome and discussed the state of relations between China and the Holy See, described in paras below by topic.

[¶3.](#) (C) Dialogue between Holy See and China: Zen said that both Holy See and Beijing want the process of dialogue back on track promptly. In fact, he confirmed that Archbishop Celli (ref D) will be returning to China in a month or so for back-channel talks; he considered this noteworthy since usually a round of talks begins with a visit of Chinese officials to Rome, and Celli's next trip will bypass that step. Zen said that when meetings happen in Rome, it's normally under the auspices of the Chinese ambassador to Italy.

[¶4.](#) (C) Zen's relations with Beijing and the Patriotic Association: Zen said the PRC government was afraid to contact him. The government hears distorted reports about him from many people, but also some positive reports from party members who know and like him. Thus, said Zen, they are confused. As for leaders of the Patriotic Association, they never even try to get in touch with Zen, and he doesn't want to hear from them.

[¶5.](#) (C) Situation of Catholics in China: Overall conditions are improving, but remain problematic. There are fewer arrests, generally for shorter duration, and in less harsh conditions; but the arrests themselves are unjust and remain a serious concern. Zen also recalled the continuing unexplained disappearance some six years ago of two bishops.

[¶6.](#) (C) Illicit ordination of bishops: Zen dismissed suggestions that his elevation to cardinal had angered Beijing enough to proceed with the subsequent illicit ordinations of bishops; he did not see the two actions as at all comparable. (In other words, the Holy See's promotion of an existing bishop to

cardinal status is a small thing compared to the very serious step of China's having ordained bishops without approval from Rome). Zen attributed the ordinations entirely to the Patriotic Association, whose actions he believes are merely tolerated by the government, not encouraged by it. Zen predicted that all of the bishops involved in the illicit ordinations (two ordained, eleven others participating) will seek reconciliation with the pope. Everyone will shun the excommunicated bishops, this is very serious for them. The bishops find ways to communicate with Rome, said Zen; in fact, he was carrying with him a letter from one of the bishops seeking exactly that.

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COMMENT  
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17. (C) Zen was direct, energetic, and open. He said he is in a difficult position having both to look after Hong Kong and also help the Church on the mainland. He also spoke warmly of his relations with the US Consulate General in Hong Kong. Zen's confirmation of Celli's plans, and his overall optimism, is somewhat surprising given the general impression here that normalization of relations had come to a standstill in the wake of recent controversy.

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